

2014

Tides and groundwater or Poems of 'The Dear Southwest'

Glen Phillips
Edith Cowan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecubooks>



Part of the [Poetry Commons](#)

First published in 2014 by the International Centre for Landscape and Language (CREATEC), Edith Cowan University. Edited by Shane McCauley

Recommended Citation

Phillips, Glen, "Tides and groundwater or Poems of 'The Dear Southwest'" (2014). *ECU Books*. 4.
<https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecubooks/4>

This Book is posted at Research Online.
<https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecubooks/4>

TIDES and GROUNDWATER

or

Poems of 'The Dear Southwest'

Glen Phillips

International Centre for Landscape and Language Press

(CREATEC: Edith Cowan University)

Editor: Shane McCauley

2014

First published in 2014 by
The International Centre for Landscape and Language (CREATEC)
Edith Cowan University
2 Bradford Street, Mount Lawley
Western Australia 6050

Copyright © Glen Phillips, 2014

This book is copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the
purposes of private study, research or review, no part
may be reproduced by any process without prior written
permission. Enquiries should be made to the Publisher.

Printed by Expo Group
7 Loftus St Leederville
Western Australia 6007
Telephone 08 9388 8999
Fax 08 9489 9899

Phillips, Glen, 1936—
Tides and Groundwater: Poems of the 'Dear South West'

Cover design by the author from his photograph of the mouth of the Donnelly River, WA.

ISBN 978-0-9924354-3-1

Editor: Shane McCauley has been a TAFE/University lecturer since the mid-1970s and seven of his books of poetry have been published, most recently *The Drunken Elk* (Sunline Press, 2010) and *Ghost Catcher* (Studio Press, 2012). He was awarded the 2008 Max Harris Poetry Award. He runs a fortnightly poetry workshop for the OOTA Writers' Group at the Fremantle Arts Centre.

Prefatory Note

The poems of *Tides and Groundwater* are saturated with a deep affection, indeed love, for the south-western landscape of Western Australia. This is even signalled in the book's alternative title, *Poems of 'The Dear Southwest'*, a tribute to an earlier lover of this landscape, the poet O.D. (Ossie) Watson.

Although primarily a vastly rewarding evocation of a particular landscape, these poems are infused with a sense of history, delightful autobiographical incidents, humour, intense observational powers, environmental concerns, and much else. And if they are poems of a particular landscape - what a landscape! Here are curling and unruly rivers, gentle hills, deep blue oceans, abundant wild flowers, steep limestone cliffs, estuaries, skyscraper trees, endless beaches. These are poems which demonstrate not only great descriptive powers, but poems that commemorate and celebrate places of enduring beauty.

A quick sampling of the titles alone suggests both the range and intrinsic lyricism of this collection: 'Almond Blossoms Again', 'Heavy Rain in Tall Forests', 'I've Known Sixty Years of Falling Trees', 'Moon Struck and the Night Bird Swooped' (a poem in itself!), 'Frost on the Landscape', 'Wind Turned the Pages of My Book', 'City to Surf', 'The Forsaken Merman Dreams On'.

To read *Tides and Groundwater* is momentarily to leave the pace and fumes of the city and walk with the poet on the white sand of deserted beaches or through the stippled shadows of the Karri forests or feel the summer heat coming over the hills in the morning. The imagery is sensuous and precise. We find 'veils of driven rain', 'dendritic mud-cracked dreams', 'wide white thighs of sand', 'starburst wetness', 'fluorescing moon glare', 'rainshowers creeping on the roof'. The truly comprehensive landscape poet here evokes all the senses, not 'only' visual perceptions. These poems are full of textures and smells and tastes and sounds.

Glen's variety of material and meditation extends to love poems, poems that recall childhood experiences, poems that record birthdays and many other milestones by which we try to measure our progress through life. There are poems in which the poet takes stock, looks at social, political or historical circumstances from current perspectives. What has been learned, gained, lost?

If it has not already been suggested, it should be said categorically that these are poems of considerable craft and skill. There is little to be gained if vision and feeling cannot be transmitted into the communicative (i.e. readable) artefact of the poem. Glen achieves this with seeming effortlessness. Reading these poems is to travel anew to the south-west in the enjoyable company of a most thoughtful and articulate guide. *Tides and Groundwater* is an exhilarating addition both to the poetry of place and to the poetry of self-discovery.

Shane McCauley, October 2014

LIST OF CONTENTS

'God, give me back my country,/For my heart is with her still' (From 'Christmas Eve, 1932', *The Dear Southwest*, O. D. (Ossie) Watson)

Local History	6
Regarding the Southern Ocean	8
The Tin Mines	10
Irregular Sonnets for RW: Arthur River Estuary, Warren Weeps	12
On a Photograph of My Sister	13
Almond Blossoms Again	14
And Thou Shalt be a Chosen God	15
A Winter Retraction	18
In a Boat Being Rowed	18
Caught in the Rain	20
Counting Them in Passing (George)	21
Dew Fall	23
Falling Apples	24
Heavy Rain in Tall Forests	24
Helena	27
Images That Haunt Us	28
Wadjemup: an Irregular Sonnet Sequence	31
I've Known Sixty Years of Falling Trees	34
Kangaroos at Serpentine Falls	35
Looking Back to Land	36
Moon Struck and the Night Bird Swooped	38
My Spring Shadows	39
Nuytsland Moon Madness	40
Portrait of a Waterfall	41
Power of Deluge	42
Rain on the Roof	44
Remembering Doves and Milkmen	45
River	46
Searching the Woods	48
The Shell	49
Tides and Groundwater	50
Head Injuries	51
The Fire at Katharine's Place	52
Apology to a Tree	54
Dumper	55
Sea Voyages: Setting Out	56
What Did You Do During the War, Daddy?	65
O Puckered Lips	68
On Top of the World	69
Personae Dramatis	70
Storm Dancing	71

Running Road	72
From Seven Settinas	73
Song for a Girl	74
The Forsaken Merman Dreams On	75
The Perfect Inverts	77
This Cooling World	78
Aftermath of Holocaust	79
Wind Turned the Pages of My Book	80
Transport in Public	81
Rain in the Afternoon	83
Near Death Experience, No. 3	88
City to Surf	89
Margins	92
Among Friends	93
Day Tripper	95
Who is to Blame?	96
Another Invasion Day	101
Alien Rottnest	102
Adam and Eve and Pinch Me	104
Frost on the Landscape	105
Blue-Green Tribute	106
Bridgetown	107
Mornington Mills	109
I Wouldn't Have Missed it for Quids	110
Greening	111
In Passing Laneways	112
He Called Them His Victims	113
Her Garden	115
Coastwatching	116
Know Your Quarry	117

Acknowledgments

A number of the poems in this book were previously published in *Umbria-Australia: Green and Gold* (with Walter Cerquetti), *Sacrificing the Leaves, Lovesongs; Lovescenes, Spring Burning, Intersections, Poetry in Motion* (ed. Shane McCauley), *Singing Granites* (with Anne Born), *Six Seasons, Red-shift Cosmology* and *Wordhord* (ed. Dennis Haskell).

The author acknowledges the Nyungar people millennial caretakers and traditional owners of the southwest of Western Australia

LOCAL HISTORY:

EXAMINATION ON THE SHORES OF THE INDIAN OCEAN

The noise was unfamiliar, yet many times known:
a score of ball-pens scurrying with a tiny roar
over the twelve-leaved examination booklets.

First I thought the noise was murmur
drifting up to a hill-top watcher of traffic
on freeway flyovers looping way below.

Or maybe sound of far-off storm waves
heard inland as they break successively,
wallowing on a continent's mapped edge.

This set me thinking of that same strand
of salty samphire marshes and heady reek
of rain-swept bushes crouched on headlands,

a wavering line on the map holding
an ocean back, the Indian Ocean, chafing
uneasily at old stubborn rock, limestone

reefs, fretted and worn to the gums. This
heaving brine was highway to the Dutch,
almost gripping their wooden ships between

their knees as they swept coastward then turned
to the north, skirting cliff and dune-lined shore.
Anxiously they raked the waves ahead for

white water, bawled orders at slow-moving
helmsmen, grunted with satisfaction when
the astrolabe confirmed the northward prospect.

Batavia and all the Indies' riches in their minds
spread upon laden trading tables for the taking.
And then the homeward run to Holland begun.

To find good Dutch pewter, meerschaum, schnapps;
the lucid Vermeer world replacing tropic dark,
though fig-thighed island girls might come no more.

All no longer presence in the memory than
the faint spiced smells of cargo beneath
tarred hatches. But what had they missed?

Passing by league upon league of pale dunes,
these rusted iron cliffs of New Holland,
which being neither rich nor strange enough

lay between Amsterdam and Batavia
like dead ground. Speaking of which
I remembered those examinees:

writing in such febrile desperation
on the history of their undiscovered
lands.

REGARDING THE SOUTHERN OCEAN

Point D'Entrecasteaux, Windy Harbour, 2001.
(for J H Prynne)

It seemed as if raked or brushed, rather,
with white combers and foam
seething over hidden reefs.

There it was deep blue water
going straight down from the face
of the cliff. Limestone capped it
but the base was a great blade
of bluestone granite. Like a flint
set to strike sparks of spray
from the chill ocean's
endless attacks.

This old Gondwanaland,
how the Dutch feared
they'd come to it at night, au!

Since the lookout might not see
keel-ripping teeth waiting below
the flying spume, nor sense
in welter of storm thunder
distant waves against granite cliffs.

Our cliff path wound among
aromatic heather and scaevolas
with hidden piping birds that
moved ahead of us through
massed foliage--dwarf mallee,
stunted acacias, hakeas
and myriad windblown shrubs.

The seawind whipped
hair and jackets, made trousers
flap like manic flags.
Hands to brows to shade our eyes
we searched the endless blue
like masthead sailors
for the spouting breath of humpbacks
or dolphins' orgasmic leaps.

But only veils of driven rain
ultimately banished the blue
of the depths beyond this landfall.
Silent we finished our cliff-top
perambulations and withdrew;

left to their own duel
the livid ocean
and that granite coast.

THE TIN MINES

Greenbushes, Easter, 1945

It was an interschool sports
day, travelling in the Sunnyside 'bus'.
A lorry load of us perched
on plank seats, canvas flaps
rolled down at the sides against
persistent rain. We clasped
our schoolbags close,
already thinking ahead
to thick-cut lunches,
raspberry vinegar, sacks
of huge green granny apples.

It was a small tin mine town
where the ore had leaked from
the granite continent beneath.
Greenbushes seemed right enough

for a hamlet's name in dense
jarrah forest. A few pubs
remained, a store or two and
the orphanage. We called them
half-caste kids, not stolen children.

While the big boys battled out
a football game in a woodlands
clearing, and the big girls clashed
their hooked hockey sticks in turn.
We slipped away with wiry
fellows from the orphanage
to where abandoned shafts
still showed how dark cassiterite,
the tin ore, had petered out.
The brightest boy of them
went down like an agile spider
bracing himself somehow in
the angle of the walls. And came
up with handfuls of the black stuff.

From FOUR IRREGULAR SONNETS FOR RW

II ARTHUR RIVER ESTUARY

When as a child we lived among salt lakes
I would go carefully stepping on dry mud islets
which formed as spring receded and summer advanced.
Beyond that tessellated margin the salt pan's
severe blank eye, white as the crow's and just
as pitiless, exhaled shimmering heat;
yet those crusty platelets in their myriad
dendritic shapes seemed to shield
gelatinous mud lying in wait all
summer to suck your boots down. To trap
and preserve you like some Silurian insect
claimed for posterity. Now as I fly
over tidal inlets, the old brown land,
I am drawn down, drowned in
dendritic mud-cracked dreams.

IV THE WARREN WEEPS

These wide white thighs of sand are parted here
so the acrid river's stream can disperse
into the Southern Ocean's chilling clear
waters, where sperm and humpbacks linger, nurse
new calves, grow strong enough to turn south and head
towards pack ice and grey storm waves
with spindrift and fume flying--plankton their bread
as someone once said. A mission to save
a beached school roused people. In a band
volunteers came over the sand dunes seeking
blistered dark mounds that lay on the land
in a shallow rush of surf. And life leaking
undone in crushed lungs, skin had turned grey
but they laved and nursed them and got them away.

ON A PHOTO OF MY SISTER AGED FIVE

My mother hated Bridgetown in the forest.
In wheatlands she'd been born and bred—
open country but with wooded hills
where eyes could rest way, way ahead

to salmon gums, fencelines, windmills.

Our home in the forest town still stands
today in the same street. We moved there
while the Sons of Heaven invaded, bombed
port after port, coming south and ever near.
But then peace in 1945 and this photograph.
My sister grasps at an errant ribbon
dangling from her hair as she hurries
to be ready for the family snapshot. Brother
stands on the verandah where the pup scurries
past honeysuckle to see what it's all about.

Photographer caught my sister before
she could look up, her pinny string untied,
breathless and hoping to be history then
on a tiny negative. Now, since she died
years back, such photos populate our lives.

ALMOND BLOSSOMS AGAIN

(XXXIXth Birthday Poem)

I thought a white moth fluttered
on the bare branch of that tree.
Surely not another year so soon?

But next day another cluster
of petals confirmed. Yet I don't need
these almonds and, anyway,

the annual visit of the green parrots
will see the husks crunched and strewn
below the tree at summer's end.

And that too will remind me well
that it's one year less, so soon. My love,
I beg you, come some way with me.

AND THOU SHALT BE A CHOSEN GOD

(XVIIth Birthday Poem)

In the bay at dusk, at journey's end,
the dark posts stepping out
into silent water,
she felt then, in a breath,
the strange strong tug of the world—
in the faint mew of birds,
in the water's lapping and the scent of the sea.

And half across the world's mystery ache

of lands, her heart was moved
for green slopes of vines
and meadow framed by chestnut,
beech and ash—that valley
curving up even beyond
the rash growth of pines.

Then in the soft October rain
the river waters glittering in sable dark,
she passed in memory
along the ancient city's riverbank
and evening drew her,
with its darker curtain, in.

Like the sudden dash of cold rain
in the face, remembrances
of the backwards glance
of an unknown worshipper
entering the great door
of a timeless city's cathedral,
seen across the dark cobbles of a square.

Time is marked by the strokes of bells
heard across darkening roof tops,
when the imperceptibly creeping blade
moves in the same time arc as
the swung bell's tongue.
In the same arc as the planet's shadow

falling before advancing holocaust
of a distant sun.

Imperceptibly as waning light
on clumps of reddened rushes
bordering shores of cold northland lakes;
as gently as receding ferryboat
blending into shadowed mainland
seen across legend's darker straits;
quietly as secret gathering dew
in the change of seasons;
circle of our life moves on.

And we, in moving
from country of our birth
in slow circle of other lands
and times we set behind us
dust of many a country road
settling among spectating
ranks of ragged trees.

In a room, then,
she pushed back her work,
looked across rooftops,
strained for the sound of bells;
a page before her where
the writing paused with the curve
of the pen's upwards stroke.

A WINTER RETRACTION

Three pinus radiata in the rain
on a winter's afternoon
are obscured by mist and shower
where the road wheels
beside the ridge and the creek rages.

The world shrinks in the rain
to the size of parlours
snug with fires.

IN A BOAT: BEING ROWED

It was the first time we country kids
 had been at sea.
We clambered into the sandy rowboat.
 Dad pushed it out
and jumped—rocking us half in the drink.
 But he grabbed oars,
rattled them in rowlocks and soon
 we seemed to surge
away from the land and out to sea.

Breasting bright waves of glittering green,
it seemed to us the shore
had become suddenly smaller than small.

And over that heaving
rocking horizon, with each pull of oars
our panic grew.
a blow it was, a terrible loss, orphaning us
from our wide brown land.
We all looked to our dad.

He saw our fallen faces. Tried to enthuse
about penguin flocks
to be found on limestone islet ahead.

It was no use, seeing dread looks
he let the wooden peak of the prow
come about to face the strand
and bent his shoulders to unite us
with our beloved land.

CAUGHT IN THE RAIN

As we embraced
 beside the wildflowers, brilliant
 in the swarming Australian bush

I should have known
 those clouds coming up
 were full of the wild rush of rain

I should have warned
 you that these hills
 we had climbed to view

the plains below
 could take the rain
 as a surfer unaware

takes the smack of a wave
 full in the throat
 and gasps for air

and though we ran
 we could not outrun that rain
 penetrating our flapping clothes

exploding its starburst wetness
on our hot bare skins
this is the way rain catches you

we should have known.

COUNTING THEM IN PASSING

I

(George)

George we admired for his artistry—
he drew just like a German, precise
and correct and his father had bought
a beautiful dark wainscoted house
with a five-branched candelabrum.

Their name was changed of course
for Europe was far behind in those days,
even though trams still ran in dozy
provincial Perth under the soft green
of bay and plane trees in spring with
soft rain in the sickle of Mounts Bay
sweeping around to where lager brewed.

Now the Bay is reclaimed for autobahns
and interchanges, the hammered sheen
of the Swan's reflective waters disappeared.
We were glad Germany and Japan
were defeated. Once and for all—jackboots
silenced, the smell of gas almost gone.

They never found his body, dashed
one hundred metres below in the sea's
turmoil; grey granite standing tall against
Southern Ocean's ceaseless battering swell.

The Gap is thronged by tourists now, but
still we wonder, his surviving classmates,
how had he come to fall so far? Was it
some agony over a friend? Or long shadow
of lamentation of a chosen race?

Yet always here on this steep stone doorstep
there is risk of a foot misplaced and the sea's
holocaust waiting below on the reefs.

DEW FALL

(For Valentine's Day 2012)

All that day smoke of karris
burning in the forests to the south.
Now dusk had come and poets
assembled to hear each other read
love poems in the Japanese garden.

My mind drifting like night calls
of tropic birds caged next door
in the city zoo. But then I felt
on my face, my arms, the faintest
kiss of dew falling in the smoke pall.

And though love poems thrummed
and marched stoutly from lips held
at kissing distance from the microphone,
sadness of loves lost, lives missed
descended softly as the dew that kissed.

FALLING APPLES

Running the race to beat the school bell's tolling
in autumn chill days we jogged past apple trees
fogbound in a neighbour's orchard. Newton's apples
of gravity no heavier than these beauties, hefty
red globules waiting to be unstemmed by rough schoolboy
tugging for a munched crisp lunch at the school's first break.

HEAVY RAIN IN TALL FORESTS

(XXIst Birthday Poem)

You have to see such rain
 to really know rain;
you have to feel cold lash of it
 through your serge school tunic
on shoulders and buttocks as you run
 for safety of home;
you have to smell the scent
 of your own wet hair
as you race like a fear-struck rabbit
 for its scraped socket
in the deep soft earth—

safe against rain's hiss.
Then, nearing the home verandah,
you hear buzz-saw of your breath,
taste chill spatter forced
past teeth and tongue
into hot throat. You have to
taste such rain.

You have to see such rain
to really know rain;
straight as the high-crowned karri boles
gray as the weatherboards,
sharp as the long nails drilled
into mill and hostel roof;
you have to know rain that can turn
into delicate shawls
draped lovingly over land's flanks;
until the ease-off comes
and low clouds brush white lips through
tree-tops, whispering back:
We withstood all your fierce attack,
and our sap shoots
high in the great shafts, searching to receive
returning Sun God's kiss.

Long-ago-weeks of wet days, red roofs
slicked with downpours;
you have to see such rain

when the silvered weatherboard
is soaked dark as a wet road;
you have to see such rain
when the hunched men, dripping in oilskins
stamp on verandahs;
you have to see such rain;
hear gutter downpipes
gouting with songs that brim water-tanks;
you have to hear such rain
to really know rain.

You have to see such rain
hurtling through tree canopies
bulleting through the centuries' leaf-mould,
through deep ash
commemorating last summer's sacrifice;
you have to see the force
of a rainforest's fierce freedom
to take this tumult,
turn its drenching gravity back into
green, green trees.

Those years ago, when you looked back
from the refuge gained—
the home in the mill-town in the rainforest—
you really knew rain.

HELENA
(for C.Y.O'Connor)

Whispering waters surge on through the great dream
time snake
that laps the miles, looping through forest paths and
rolling farmlands;

in curving walls of steel the green translucent column
cleaves with pulse of pumps
craving its return to quench the soil;

all those thunderclouds of drenching showers
that marched in across the plain
from rough sea to pelt forest crowns
and darken crouching underbrush;

all those gathering milky rivulets
in clay and gravel gullies
joining and dropping to swollen creeks
and on into that glistening sweet valley;

all those mounting waters
behind the weir's wall turned back
from their run to the grey sea,
forced back hundred upon hundred inland miles;

no wonder there is talk
there is whispering in those waters
there are messages in the pipes
of stillborn lives in country towns.

We say, where was the solace
when we lacked?
where was that precious friend
when thirst raged, the dust mocked?

Like a subtle needle then
of cooling sweetness slaking throats
the river's long-stored water
curves to intersect across a continent
with us.

IMAGES THAT HAUNT US

Once we left behind the river's
dwindled bed and had painfully climbed
among trees. Until, above scent of sedge
and reeds, we saw suddenly
green slime slicked from a corpse.

It was down on its knees by the fence,
the red-brown hide of a heifer;
more of a canopy now with holes
for eyes. And the after image stench
of its life gone, passed on, leaked away.

Limp bodies always haunt us:
the white dog senseless, though
beaten by our hands frantically
(as if to punish disobedience to life)
or a pet kitten sealed in a biscuit tin.

Under the swinging new-washed clothes
on the rotary clothes-hoist in the lawn
of our backyard our tamed magpie pet
would lie on its back and pedal like mad
at wild birds swooping. And cats.

One day we found the pedalling stopped.
Old Maggie would sing no more and lay
legs up, head stretched back, beak
pointing to magpie heaven, we guessed.

If we remember grateful Death,
who came to show the human bodies to us,
our first manifesting of the reaper's hiss,
we might re-image that young boy's head,

which impacted the mass of a hurled
motorcycle at a jump-up of a dirt-track;
and scrambled something, instantly,
that haemorrhaged on the wheel ruts.

And last, or almost last, those two
veneered rosewood crates that slid
between black curtains, just like those
that send your airline baggage round and round.

Farewell, dear parents, who spent near sixty
years with me; who pushed my body ever
forward from the first, until they could stand
back and leave me to my own desert walks.

Last night I dreamed I found
in a corner near the wall, I think,
a limp cadaver, pallid, knees rolled up.
Curiously I inspected wizened body parts.

Today, though woken up, I still hold that dream,
like a faded specimen in some glass case.
It will remind me while I still draw breath;
images that haunt us, step by step.

WADJEMUP: an Irregular Sonnet Sequence

I

Wind Claimed Our Cottage in the Night

Territorialising they call it,
the way all things defend their ground,
their power. In a sense, the wind
is the land's loving, coming to touch
lightly, or rough with ardour, jostling
our joists, purlins, gables and eaves.
So the wind too claims territory, scudding
over these moon-raked waves between
this patch of sacred ground and the mainland,
doesn't it? Where they don't inter suicides
or infidels, who've given themselves to air's
liberating hands. Wind claimed our cottage
in the night, last night. And I,
overhearing, understood love's might.

II

Incarcerates

Just last week there returned to me
memory of one winter years ago. We

took five days at the Rottnest Lodge
and after grey sea passage in the old steam
ferry, found our rooms were prison cells,
or had been once. Something about the rain
that swept the Island day after day.
We'd duck out for tennis and in again,
or when the next shower passed, grab bikes
and off hell-for-leather, raincoats flying,
peering over our shoulders for the next storm to strike
But most of all in the former cells we did time.
Only last week that old photo I recalled
of chained tribal prisoners, hung in the dining hall.

III

He Never Took Us to Rottnest

Our father never took us to Rottnest,
though maybe we didn't really know why.
Perhaps suburban folk thought of it best
in the 'twenties as a place where feared dark
men were sent. As Daisy Bates said, it would
be their dying pillow, their passing on. I think
of more modern Rottnest parties in merry mood
leaving the Port for fraught wave-jostled passage
across salt sea. In straw boaters, striped blazers,

bearing cane hampers—even a brass band
ta-rahing on top deck. But were curtain raisers
for when they bumped against jetty jarrah staves
in Thompsons Bay, put up white canvas, ignored
those haunted bodies upright in their graves.

IV

My Head on the Rough Pillow

My head on the rough pillow of this place
is full of frenzied sounds of blood rustling
as my sleeping heart pulses still, after
a day of coursing the island's arteries
buffeted by the memory of that rush
of bustling wind which bore in, across waves.
It roared past my body, poised amid dunes,
shook each grass-blade and the thin twigs
of Rottneest ti-trees and pines crouched in dark glades.
And more, murmur of casuarinas' elegiac tunes,
remembering songmen of long ago keening
in this east wind's roughly reassuring hands.
On my sleepless pillow I try to trace such
journeys over saltlake and sea to this sacristy.

I'VE KNOWN SIXTY YEARS OF FALLING TREES

You never forget that sound
in the wet winters of rainforests
when you first heard them
bring a great tree to the ground.

You never forget the tree's groan
as men jump away, the crosscut's
work done, wedges clattering, and
the forest's sigh as it comes down.

You never forget the snap of limb
the crackle of saplings and bracken
as the corpse comes crashing through
and buries itself in deep forest loam.

You never forget that sound
of one hand clapping in the company's
boardrooms, well-panelled in choice
jarrah, karri and tuart, doomed.

KANGAROOS AT SERPENTINE FALLS

(during the struggle for independence in East Timor)

They came down from the hills
tentatively at first, ears
twitching, nobility of noses
raised to the wind
as if deciding that the offence
of our human odours—
the richness of benzines
from cooling car exhausts,
charred chops on the barbecues,
whiffs of aftershave or underarm—
was one worthy
to be endured these two centuries
of ethnic wild-life cleansing.

After all, how many
of them had been crucified
in spotlight or headlight?
Just as Ulsterman or Catholic,
Christian Democrat or Socialist,
fascist or resistance fighters
and pro- or anti-independence
on the long roads to appeasement
from Dili to Baucau
towards a doubtful peace?

At Serpentine, resigned it seemed
at last, shoulders drooping,
muzzles bowed to crop
the park's clean fresh grass
they came down from the hills.

LOOKING BACK TO LAND

(Blood is a salt as seawater)

Swimming out through rumpling
green Indian Ocean wash
you turn and see the smooth
brown outer casings of
the four-limbed human kind
at play upon the beach.
Their younglings gambol in
the foam; ancients once
more dip their feet. Pleasant
enough this scene — harmless
they look, over the rough
crests of the shoreward-running
waves. With their bright toys, their
sportive draperies on
mammaries and pubes, who would
think that anything but

innocence and joy would
come from them? Yet, for all
this gambolling on smooth
virginal beachsands, gay
dipping of limbs into clear
blue waters, these same brown
bodies, directed by these
same soft, dark heads
could lust, revenge, cry pity,
run amok. So thinking
upon these human ones
a swimmer turns and strokes
again, trying in vain to put salt sea
between himself and them.

MOON STRUCK AND THE NIGHTBIRD SWOOPED

Something stirred in gravel at the pit-edge,
Handful of leaves turned over, slid down.
Out of tree shadows into the fluorescing moonglare
dipped on unwhistling wings the bush owl;
fluttered aloft again in unpausing flight
to rest, silent watcher on a grey gum bough.

Staring at corroded surface of the moon,
my socketed eyes grew crazed. And I,
cringing creature, hunted under that hissing
arc-lamp of the moon, in panic searched
side-to-side in that cold and cratered landscape
where I'd strayed. In my sweating turn of mind
I saw an old grey horse become a tree-stump;
and become a leering fellow-bedlamite in turn.
And, as the blood drained back, I found you,
humankind, were also there with whitely upturned
face replying to gaze of the moon. Your brow
calm, eyes dark. But still I felt swoop and flutter
of the moon-struck nightbird, bush owl, there.

MY SPRING SHADOWS

Slow purple rain
falling like severed wings
of great mauve moths

So slowly that the eye notes
one and turning away
one and one more in the
cornered blink

But in the morning
these lawns and steps
and paving slabs in bright panoply
are strewn with a royal shadow

And I marvel then
how where in the deep white sand
that underlies my garden
by what alchemy my jacaranda
found so much purple
richer than vestments
of a whole line
of mightiest kings
to make my spring shadows.

NUYTSLAND: MOON MADNESS

Under ranked rough-barked peppermints
full shaft of moon's setting light
blazes on liquid shadow this night.

Wrenched from frenzied dreams of pain
sleeper faces moon's fury again,
suffering seethe of age-old spells.

And distant, hears the splash
of wings on water, wild-duck gabble.
Then small skip of fish and splash

that turns back flash of stars
in glinting inlet's cloud-lapped sky.
Pale imaged beaches stretch up high

to dense bush slopes. And dark
columned forest reaches to mark
stony signatures of hill's rough ridge.

Weathered grey rock doorstep, bordering
our continent, still shakes with thundering
of land's beginning, land's granite end.

PORTRAIT OF A WATERFALL

Beedelup Falls

I have seen many a waterfall
where the slow swim of green
slides over the mantle of rock
and instantly transforms to foam.

That dizzying drop of shining white
thunders to the river's new floor
and rainbows of spray hang in the air.
Below, the water gathers itself in;

flows on from the froth-skeined face
of the dark cauldron where it fell;
and you float into my mind as if
gazing upward from this waterfall's embrace.

POWER OF DELUGE

In April in the country after month
upon month of summer the air
changes: skies take on the milkiness
of the film on a blind man's eyes.

Suddenly there is not the welcome cool
of evening. In the night the air is chill
and mornings follow in a hazy fume.

Across the windstruck skyline suddenly
like the tail of a kite, raucous black
cockatoos fly screeching to the pine tops.
And children call them the 'rain birds'.

Where they have been you see holocausts
of torn twigs and ransacked cones
scattered on the silent earth beneath the pines.

And now at night you hear the hidden frogs
whooping again. They importune Gooljak
king of frogs to unloose his great
pale belly distending with the winter rains.

Night after night they chant and chant
litanies in the gardens, in the fields.

And at last in the norwest, darkening the earth,

risers the shadowed bulk of their King.

As often times over the lowlands
of Sumeria or the Nile
when that scent of rain at evening
has promised the rising flood,
the frogs redoubled their pleading chants;
and a patter of answering drops comes
on the powdery dust. Dry grass stoops,
the tree leaves quiver like moths,
then ranks of grey showers hammer the roofs;
I see dark rivulets run from the spouts this night.

Afterwards as the rain steadies
on the black glistening road,
thankful white-robed crowds
of frogs advance out of swamp and ditch
to stand in the beam of our lights,
heads aloft to their awaited God-King.
Their faith, their great longing satisfied
just as our whizzing tyres
smack them down, as if they were pale leaves
pasted on the stones by rush of rain.

RAIN ON THE ROOF

Well to be safe when Autumn's slain
to hear outside the quiet tune
of rainshowers creeping on the roof again

knowing the lull of certain calm
no matter how the branches stream
lambent with love to each we turn

these gestures ancient as the fall
these forecast storms if we should fail
always at last our tender duel

then while the hostile tempests wrack
and leaves across the window rake
more sweetly we our love unlock

REMEMBERING DOVES AND MILKMEN

Seeing the gleaming churns again
on vendors' ramshackle shelves
in a Chinese country street; or strung
on crossbar of a jolting peasant's bike
pedalled down mud paths of paddy fields;

hearing croon and coo of doves again
along brown shores of Kerala's coasts,
buff, plump Malabar birds that squat
in warm dust or strut and arch their
turtle necks coyly each to each;

sniffing salt spindrift's breath
of ocean's running white crests
off a bare summer beach of Gela's
Sicilian shore, where the wash
of foam spreads up and up wet sands;

feeling underfoot tough tussocks
of Dartmoor's rain-pelted heaths,
grit of granite buffing the boot
on grave gray granite tors beside
chilled wrought iron of barred gates;

tasting furled yellow-leather tang
of chestnuts freed from spiked husks
or tiny wild strawberries in woodland
grass beside a fresh torrent dashing
down an uplands Lombardy glen;

weighing up all these strong memories
of foreign lands, I think I hear childhood's
clink and clank of cool dippered milk
from the silver can, taste creamy skin; and
wake to turtle doves flirting in city streets.

RIVER

They say we must save our river,
but who can claim your sliding
waters between the dark rush-bound reaches
and sultry green ocean shallows?

Among these bunched river reeds
careful toes of the Nyungar first
stepped on the riverbank sand flats.
And in shadowed waters ancient
shapes, the forms of all our former

lives flash their scales, twist or throb
beside mudbanks and waving weeds.

On the air you sniff insistent fume
of flowering marri, banksia, wandoo;
pungence of dune heaths, musk
of the loping western greys
heavy on the river breeze.

In deeper waters the silent red-beaked
swans once stroked like a fleet
of tall black ships on the tide
of these salt estuarine waters;
now only stilt and cormorant pass.

So now we see replanted grasstrees
in millionaire's gardens and their
monumental edifices rise nobly
where curving autoways sweep
and link and part again towards
glitter of crystalline pinnacles
clustered on sullied shores.

Subtle our State's foundation day
was honoured with the first stroke
of steel on a tree by a dancing axe.

SEARCHING THE WOODS

(XXIVth Birthday Poem)

You have been there in green shadows,
your face paler than the great ranked trees,
paler than stunted clearing where the moon
burns shrub and tussock with her cool glare.

You have stumbled over bodies
buried in this shroud of leaves (lost children,
crazed princes) baffled by a mass of briared thorns
that climbing darkened a darkening sky.

You have paused for breathing moments
sensing confinement of your onward roaring
arteries until all was quiet. Then, worse than
blood stalked you with its flensing teeth.

You have sometimes passed the hours
hunched over surly fires, your face streaked
with tears again. And when rain replied
you found shelter, shared night's old ache

until day came. Then a stream's passing
parted the foliage and you glimpsed a distant
ridge where forest thinned the skyline's thrust;
and, quickening, you yearned the homeward step.

Dark forest behind you with its fabled forms,
you came down the long slope of meadowland
to vines and stone houses lit with lamps
and found lintels and doorsteps you had known.

THE SHELL

Secret in the shell's long
curved corridors is some
miracle we dare not say;
for the words might destroy
the intricacy echoed in the ear.

This whispering some claim
is the sound of the sea
but I believe it is massed
choirs of all the children
there ever were, singing

the human story traced
from legends of the genes:
hear, then, multiplying cells,
the first backbone formed,
then gills and heaving lungs.

So on the clean beach sand,
this shell's cipher and signature
of life's history on Earth—
on this old revolving stone
in our evolving universe.

TIDES AND GROUNDWATER

What could kill me is the groundwater
of our love which has risen as trees
were cleared from the space, so we
no longer stay unseen by each
other, hidden in dark shadows
of standing forests. Knowing wild

impertinence of passion, my salt tears
whiten the earth. And I tread red clay
until my footprints show on this
surface that grows ever more silvered
than my hair will be. Is this, then,
how I must learn to die for you?

That salt moon up there which shines
down on the canal's lapping surfaces

is drawing the dark tide into this harbour
to rise among saline posts and piers
until we feel its cool liquid incisions
link our bodies with its drowning touch.
Was our love so heated only the moon's
cold power could quench fires
that would consume furious hearts?

HEAD INJURIES

From chill of narrow lakes
misty morning smoked softly
through the ranked drenched trees.

Amongst the chunks of glass
and the ripped-up bitumen
he lay inert as the stupid machine—
almost. Because someone
in a scarlet cardigan
stooped to hold
a ruptured artery,
he wasn't yet as cold
as the wet morning road.

And the inching queue
of cars (occupants
hunched over heaters,
windows grey with the breath of life)
bled on towards the city's
hectic
money-making
morning
hype.

THE FIRE AT KATHARINE'S PLACE

(in the early 1990s the Writers Centre was nearly burned down)

At Katharine's place I'm in the fireplace.
But I'm about to break out in depths of night.
Confined in these raked-over coals I fret,
for nobody could possibly expect that
it is I here, plotting so darkly
a desperate dastardly act.

I've sat here night after weary night
for a hundred years, watching these
humans haemorrhage their thin blue
or black rivulets on their blank sheets,

dribbling out of their fantasies
from their dandling finger-ends.

Sheaf after sheaf of their papers
they have laid down on shelf
upon shelf of their work rooms.
Their collected words, selected
works and all their rejected reams
are to me now unprotected dreams.

One night it came to my mind,
glowering here in the hearth's ash
that I could rise up, send their
sonnets, novellas and scripts for stage
or screen, their short stories and cinquains,
novels and biographies to smithereens.

Anyway their words should be set afire,
their long slow fuse of non-completions
tempts me to put spark to blue touchpaper,
stand back and see the whole damn
tragic accumulation go sky high like that
prized dynamite of the Nobel tribe.

APOLOGY TO A TREE

I am really writing on your face:
for that, first of all I ask grace,
Mr (or Mrs) Tree, as may be the case.

Ah, how can a poem be lovely as a tree
when even to write it there must be
the dreaded axe and chain saw of me?

Over years my busy pen has raced
its wavering lines down page after page laced
with the black froth of my poems 'in haste'.

Leaf after leaf of the virgin white
has flashed into view of my bead eyesight
but never provoked the tree leaves' plight.

Mrs (or Mr) Tree, whichever is correct,
when I think of the groves of pines I've wrecked
to write my lines, I'd prefer to resurrect

the sigh of the wind through branches clean,
the scent of the flexing foliage green
of that straight-backed grove I've never seen.

But instead, ending this page (cont. overleaf),

I ask of the tree shadow, ‘turn the other cheek,’
underneath my racing pen: ‘this poem’s a funeral wreath!’

DUMPER

(for Mamie from Inner Mongolia)

When seated on a bright towel
spread out on the virginal sand
you look over a whole sea beach
and see families and couples, all
happy to be dashed by breakers,
rolled in the foam, or stretched
out bronzed and barely dressed.

Some search for common seashells,
others pride themselves with sand
pinnacles, or hand built high-rise
cities. Only the waves come in
roughly and wreck the real estate.
The first warning of the sea’s strength.

We call them ‘dumpers’. Waves
that rise up sharply and display

promise of boosting surf rides
to the shore. Beginners are deceived.
Think they can ride in upon them, but
seductive waves can break your back.

So when you cavort joyfully
on these spreadeagled pristine sands
of the west, learn quickly to spot
the rise of the ‘dumper’. And dive
through it, don’t confront the wave,
or it’ll thump you onto your butt.

Strange for the ocean to be so mean
you might think, ruefully rubbing
your bruised back, but it was you
who undressed to your bathing
costume and went to play half
naked in that lover’s foam and froth.

SEA VOYAGES

PUTTING OUT

I

Ile Bauche lies across the reefs
pointed to by sinuous sandbar streak;
the gulls come, calling some

their profanity and blustering.

The very old salt sea washes
over the sandbank's shifting flank,
clothing and unclothing thigh of land
with the rush of brine;

the gulls are treading water,
one struts and bobs, pursues,
its red beak gapes cacophony;
the flock begins an antiphonal chant.

The cold saltwater swirling
up to the sandbar carries
sea debris, spreading itself.
Beginnings are arbitrary.

Morning traffic rumbles down
behind the jetties and the rusting towers.
This is the shore and this
the time for putting out.

II

The faded blue of tattered waters
beckoned. Time for putting out —
the stroke that severs —
burning of match and guttering lantern.

Seeming a deliberated act,
yet when the twisting oars
rock the old tub, washing
the salt swill about her ribs

he cannot claim the authorship,
the final lunge, heaving the craft
adrift. The gulf of small waves
asserts a widening ache.

The passage of the voyager
leaves as its mark this darker
pattern of wavering waters:
stain of passing, indifferent to will.

But when the boat's thrusting prow
clouts on limestone rock
the oarsman finds his will is swift
and leaps to shove his craft to landfall.

Under his questioning feet the stones
roll and shift, as if he treads upon
beech mast of jawless skulls strewn
beneath kelp-entangled foam.

III

Strange it should seem so strong,
this sense of urgency impelling
each footfall over the island strand,
leaving behind the boat, waters, rock.

Wind in the couching branches
quickens. The leaves clasp
at his shoulders, flanks,
dragging through his hair.

He bursts on a clearing
where the birds rise squalling,
scattering. Here an old hewn
limestone shack. He stumbles
through garden remnants:
border row of upturned bottles
and sullen pigface marking
a path that leads nowhere now.

A rusting water tank sweats
at the gaping back door;
piece of old horse harness
hangs dusty on the wall.

Glimpsed glinting in the sand
by unroofed verandah the case
of some long-lost pocket watch.
Gathers its chain and sees it swing.

Now an empty metal O
where once the midget wheels
whirled and roared and measured
out the anvil strokes of time.

And a legless chair props its back
against a wall; a walking stick
wedges fallen in crevices of stones
where laurel bush rustles at a window.

IV

In the hut is a hearth, crumbling
but still there. Wind outside holds
scent of rain and salt-sea spray.
He gathers branches, whitened

as if some holocaust had bleached
their leaves to ash. But dry wood
tinders easily, he kneels as it
bursts into warming flames.

In the warm hearth glow
rain in the afternoon becomes
remembrances of red and black

as memory rides ridged fields,

runs nosing along boundary wires,
enters sleeping parlours and the
undisturbed dust of classrooms;
finds itself at last far from land

in warm dark oil mist under steamer
hatches; and knows the terrible last
lunges of the prisoners trapped
in pitiless glare of slow nightmares

slow-moving on blank roadway
above leering light of stars. Knows
apocalyptic hillside-heave. Sees
aqueducts of blood, racing

to outpace the floodgate's closing;
then glittering ranks of war
advancing with stench of death
beneath bright fluttering flags.

V

Branches in the hearth collapse.
He thrusts more firewood
into the cascading coals;
wood flares and the images

people the rough room;
hands from in the flames
reach out, promising
consuming passion and pain.
Then beneath blaze of moon
faces burn in the shadows,
white as chrysanthemums,
not-to-be-equalled burning of spring.

Phoenix and cockerel with fabled
flames burst in brief glory
to the firewatcher there. In crackling
matchwood flotsam small things speak.

And amassed armour of light
thrusts sea glare cruelly in his eyes
until his face is impassive
as a travelled golden coin.

But stirred, his lips frame
a phrase: *the everlasting arms*.
And there he sees a cup
among burning coals. Whether

he wills or no, his hands lift
the vessel to dry lips;

he drains the *minnetranc*,
knowing he is not first

to bring a mouth
to that burning brink
or to feel the lurch
of unstable spheres.

VI

See now the ciphers of enactments
unconceived: raddled moons
and stippled dragons' tongues.
Nightbirds swooping over dark pools
and low gentle cries across waters
lapping like wavelets on lake shores.

VII

The hearth all ash,
the room grown musty, cold,
the rain has ceased, and he
stumbling goes out into twilight,
across the clearing, plunges

into the scrub, down
to that foolish boat.
In the long shadows of the shore
his craft eludes. Perhaps the tide's
seabreathing has reclaimed shipwreck?

Back up the ridge he toils
and in the hut's clearing finds
only a heap of rubble
as if someone had come
to build and found the stone
but not the will.

VIII

Around him flight of birds
thrust threatening wings—
the ingathering of darkness swooping.
Looking to land he sees
the wink of lighted towns;
looking to sea he finds
clear weals of water
at the yellow of evening.

Clarity of present anguish
is relinquished.
In chaos of resurrection

we may find
not the heavy
sail of death, but
island after wooded island
rocked by importuning waves.

WHAT DID YOU DO DURING THE WAR, DADDY?

(or the Battle of Camboon Road)

Of course it was one of those things you won't forget;
we women had been gathered in our gardens
that very morning telling about how, in fright,
we'd hardly slept a wink all night;

thinking the visitant wind was Him
shaking the window glass and making
tree shadows waver on the bedroom wall.
And husbands slept sound as ever through it all!

The telly news had shown the best of it—
the body of the victim, head down, arms flung,
the death-blood licking down the car to ground.
But not the copper with the bellywound;

or the good, brave old taxi-man
brought back safe and sound by news hounds.

Made it all seem real to meet the one
who'd been in a Demon's clutches, escaped the gun.

Yes, miracle this taxi chap had got away!
Car had bogged and while the Madman skulked
from tree to tree, and search planes overhead
droned up and down, faking lameness, fled.

Judge for yourself how hard it was to sleep—
lying in wait for shake or rattle at the door.
So read and re-read evening papers through
until the merest detail of the pictures knew.

But morning came, strange as it seemed,
with no dread knock. No doubt the Monster,
stalked by his own blood-path all night alone,
was seeking sanctuary but had found none.

During the afternoon the newsmen spread
the words (our hearts were flushed with righteous thrill)
that police now had their quarry cornered, tired
and desperate: 'Men able-bodied with guns required!'

Then it began, the greatest moment of our street—
car after car went hurtling through, disgorging
stern, well-armed, red blooded chaps—
keen to protect us womenfolk, or die, perhaps.

And presently the street so parked with cars
that television news-vans strained to pass;
and some late-coming men (faint-hearted still)
were not to see the final fleshwound shots, the kill.

My husband? Confession cuts me to the quick—
refused to stir, thought neighbours spared a gun—
he stood as one dumbfounded at the gate,
staring with disbelieving eyes until, too late,

for through the glittering ranks there dashed
the victors with their Beast, blood-dyed
(and faces grim as guns) in hurtling ride
but yet exultant! Each claiming a hero's pride.

My husband, sullen in my disapproving eye,
was muttering something as he came inside.
I waited, while the tellynews replayed the scene;
I thought he said, 'Are *our* hands so clean!'

O PUCKERED LIPS!

Haunted by worn shapes
of boulders old and rounded
(poised on their granite pedestals)
I ponder path I am ready to be rolled.

When impassive hillsides, glistening
on that eventful day begin to heave
and, slowly at first, great trees turn
in the loosening earth,

pluck reluctant straining roots,
then these megaliths will tumble down
and take me, flecked with moss,
mudsmear'd with the wash

of untrapped waters until
I am a patch of dark and mash of bone;
but thinking of you I wish
to poise for just one particle of time

until the whole world cracks to powder
and the wrenched impacted tree-trunks
amid those fallen stones
burst into last flare of flame

ON TOP OF THE WORLD

Stirring the dry detritus
of winters in this teeming decaying land,
being among this thin biosphere
that moving, moves and spawns
one can presume to ask yet again
why should we so confidently be
on top of the world?

PERSONAE DRAMATIS (Or, aren't we all installation artists?)

Lately it has troubled me,
striding preoccupied city streets
pacing through campus corridors,
to look upon the multitude.

Once in awe of my race I viewed
with wonder each new human
I was to meet. All told tales of youth
or age, offered their mystery

of human birth, or family history.
By some I was repelled in fear,

others drew me to them, sun
reflected from their cheery faces.

The list of Dickens' cheerful players
lengthened with each large volume
I spread open upon its spine.
Lawson's diggers and swagmen

shifted blucher boots uneasily
beside open graves. Or breasted the bar
to blow shearing cheques, with
their names chalked up as I O Us.

Rarely I observed dread traces
of mortality, for they appeared
so resolute with life's rich intent.
But I see now writ large it seems

a death march dynasty. Each deems
to be the centre of the universe of
him or her. And hell bent to defend
this patch in the sun, grow old before

their time. What fortune will unfold
for them I wonder? Will their cargo
cult one day provide the interest
on such cumulative capital?

Or will they see this battle
to survive as I do now, merely
artful three score and ten length
installation, and then death's applause?

STORM DANCING

When yellowing leaves litter paths, rain comes:
wet wheels swish shining streets with whiplash swirl,
householders conduct on doorway rostrums
overtures as their umbrellas unfurl;
in racing gutters children improvise
paper regattas, try to block the flood;
but mums on verandahs raise anguished cries,
call uncivil engineers from the mud.

Then new threats rise up out of skies of slate
as garden trees and thickets seethe and thrash.
Meanwhile, husbands dive from backdoors, too late
to save the drooping washing in their rush.
Arc weldings warn! Great thunderheads re-form;
like the condemned, we bow before this storm.

RUNNING ROAD

Rain bursts on the windscreen
of the car wheeling through the hills
by a narrow road that spills
with running water. On a bend
the garden of someone's private
home leans over its fence as if
to see who passes by. The rose bush,
nosiest of all, sheds roses
all over the road and I see
a fallen bloom taken by flood
of the swollen gutter. Petals
like lost love notes flood downstream
one following one. Is it true
they call all lovers to come view
these hills and find, even in a storm,
messages, presentiments of renewal?

From SEVEN SETTINAS

I

LENGTH OF DAY

(Carinya, June, 1970)

Shortest day of the year now
and the first light breaks slowly
over laterite strewn slopes.
These bush creatures join us. These
slopes where we've camped warm over
slowly. A redbreast poises. And
now we know what's day's shortest.

II

EXCUSE THE SLOW RESPONSE

(Mount Lawley, May, 2000)

Easy now! If your first rains
break too soon in the season
those fresh green shoots will dry out,
blow away as wind will blow
out candles. But there are those
seasons when there's a real break.
Rains soak in. Grass grows easy.

SONG FOR A GIRL

(a palimpsest for John Dryden)

Young I am walking in an orchard
of maturing fruits and see a lover yield.
How to keep these images of green shade?
I believe this taught me when to feign.

Take me from these dry wheatlands
to deep forest where trees grow young and true
till I need recall no more
those bodies jerk in dust; and roll my eyes.

Stay not till knuckles ring hollow on
the water tank's lowest rungs and to betray
he that has sired you and your kin;
to stay longer would be to deceive the rest.

Could I find fresh water to replace
dust-brimmed teacups? And full of truth,

brisk, and of sound mind and body,
shed the mire of years,
again to be fifteen?

THE FORSAKEN MERMAN DREAMS ON

When I first looked on surf's
mystery movement, swirl
and crash or heave of
riding swell, I was nonplussed.

Coming from dry season's salt pans,
spindle-legged mallee flats, taken
to seashore by our city grandma,
I nearly choked on the reek of
ammonia-charged seaweed banks
and seeming acid salt spray.

It was crash of endless rollers
the surge of ejaculated foam

drove me back up damp strand,
so sharply sown with seashells.

Peering back, past turbid swirl
and undertow I searched the depths
where long-tressed mermaidens might
lash their gleaming scales, hide schools
of panicked offspring from titanic whales.

These days, seeing you cling to your
salt-soaked plank in this storm's
aftermath, your life like a shifting
sand-bank seen through tumultuous
waters, I remembered how I held
my new grandmother's hand hard
at my first sight of the drowning sea.

THE PERFECT INVERTS

(Sarah Hopkins: 'Cello Chi')

If you had the right ear for it
you'd hear thunder of pristine
mushrooms emerge with autumn.

The bunkers and silos open to nose
cones angled to take reverse thrust
of the seeming lethal lithosphere
of the Earth's restraining crust.

Before the crunch of the clay
impacted makes way to sweet
sanctuary of moist night air,
these beauties had perfection
of a pod of pygmy whales
ready to be stranded, keening
on some Southern Ocean beach.

But with their superhuman strength
these bobbing white caps do insist;
nightly to lift-off. In the morning
show as mighty flotillas landed here
to wink in the autumn atmosphere.

THIS COOLING WORLD

Yea, she hath passed hereby and blessed the sheaves 'Kore'

Frederic Manning

She walked alone over the brow of landscapes,
Persephone, ungathering autumn
under the long sweep of pale cloud-scaled skies.

A gnawing wind mouthed diffidently
the stubble strands; thin-stemmed mallees stirred
as she leaned back against these living wands.

Among detritus of that same ironstone ridge
the last ants jerked towards their labyrinthine
darknesses. Sun too weak to warm gelid air.

A world away the booted thump and cries
and muted mass cacophony of auto horns
came faintly to her: the yearly slain.

She walked on, stirring the russet weeds,
stumbling over scattered sleepers' bones;
passing with the plundering wind
over the dark undelivered land.

AFTERMATH OF HOLOCAUST

'Not hunters and gatherers so much as sharers' Richard Leakey

These trees are pollarded then,
strewn on the grass, the debris
of chainsaw violence in the street.

They sweep up sprays of lilac
berries, turning an autumnal fallow.
What is it like pollen grains under
the trees? Not legacy of spring flowers
but thicker dust of sawn boughs.

Shell-shocked in that moment
you feel the loss, strange emptiness
of presences in suburban streets,
the years of sanctuary you lived.

So do we know a little of silence
now? As after the shelling barrages
ceased in Messines Wood. A little
of the emptiness that humankind
had left in its ranks after Guernica
or the leafless forests of Vietnam?

Why must we crop these living limbs?
Because humankind always has

harvested trees and youth this way?

Winter firewood is set aside
in bundles high in stone lofts to dry
in Lombardy. You can see it often
as you trudge white dirt roads
that unfold in avenues of poplars—
these trees the honest *contadini*
cut back every now and then,
easily as at *Dongo* they cut *il Duce* down.

Do we cut life back, time and again,
to see it start afresh in spring?
Something to share at last
in clean, new growth? Perhaps.

WIND TURNED THE PAGES OF MY BOOK

While I, in my mind, tread
barefoot the brick of my driveway,
recapturing as I gaze up at
the neat constellations of my
childhood, so clear (of which,
now I mention it, the fierceness
of widespread country night skies

once distanced us utterly from
the anguish, terror, fears of our
adult betters), there return such times
so clear and precise in mind. Yes,
while so diverted, the pages
of my book are turned swiftly,
suddenly by the evening's wind.

TRANSPORT IN PUBLIC

(In the shuddering revulsion from death one turns instinctively to love as an act which seems to affirm the completeness of being... Frederic Manning, "Her Privates We")

late long distance bus rattles up
the wind is breathing noisily in dry-leafed banksias
verandah roof creaks in the lowering evening wind
memory and desire
crouch for the certain spring

bare-headed and handed the chosen mate waits
humped at the end of another corridor

long oh so long the passage
through paddocks gray in darkness
trees clump closely
metalled slash of road rises
to stone-studded hilltops

past mudflats
and brief glitter of little wire-strung country towns

on the blue flickering screen
a shirt is flapping of a
Vietcong leader captured
short bareheaded tight-lipped empty-handed dazed
is jerked along seized
by the pistol-wielding officer
shoved quickly away from the group of men
the pistol lifted
levelled
spits

he seemed to fall so suddenly
almost before
the shot

memory gathers in
a road unrolling in headlamp glare
the beaded lights of towns ahead
receive the speeding coach
sidelong glances
long silences
peace restless as ever
hangs fire

as prisoners of love

find images cast
to taunt them
through the bars

RAIN IN THE AFTERNOON:

fit subject for a fugue

“I have loved truth...where can I find it?”

Le Rouge et le Noir

Tamarisk, your fine dark winter webs
are waving softly against a cold grey sky;
idly the large wet drops are flicking down
roughly pasting concrete paths with carmine leaves.

Across the dumbly waiting lines of scrub
ragged shadows of drenching showers march
in, darkening the boughs and boles and bowing
the over-burdened shrubbery to homage.

In gathering of early winter evening
the hearth fire intrudes the coil of thoughts
as canes of glory-vine suspend their
red leaves against palings dark with rain.

Across the attitudinising shuffle of years,
taken back to the sap-strong struggle of youth,
I remember us standing with heaving lungs,
reclaiming the spent air lost as we cycled hard;

and into our eyes the sweat ran with the rain;
red clay clogged our sodden boots where we stood—
the great fire-charred trunk of a tree, chosen
in haste to shelter from that all-quenching shower.

Air, fire, earth and water did not
injure us in our juvenescent days;
tired but insatiate we always found the strength
returning; mounted our machines and rode away.
In the glow of light which the window throws
acalypha leaves edged with fire are hanging
trembling at the impact of assaulting rain; and
resistless mind is showered with memory's grains.

Tenuously the images come sidling back:
rabbit-trapping in the drenching valley mists.
In yellow glow of the lamplight swinging,
a row of rabbits, silent now, dripping their dark blood.

Across valley of sparsely granulated rooftops
in the foggy spring of nineteen forty five,
receiving longed-for news of priceless peace,
the wet red roofs and darkwood walls steamed in the sun.

Remember that schoolday? Running amok
in only partly comprehended paeon of joy
a schoolmate banged the air-raid siren 'til it stuck.
Tolling of churchbells mingled with shrieks of trains.

Incessant roar of the dark river—rising where
the liquidambar disassembling its florid cone
reared autumnal branches over racing waters;
and we stood in the rain to watch the logs float down.

That river, it slowly sank in late summer,
into the receiving sand banks between washed stones;
retracing those dwindling waters, we sought elusive sound,
a whip-bird, cracking melodious lashes all the day.

Thinking of the peaceful circle of the evening meal
interrupted by a frightened fugitive from the next street
and see again annoyed distaste showing in all of us at
red blood matting already her long black hair.

Injuries we suffered in such ways as these
regretting the interruption of our measured ways,
alone in no-mans-land that distraught girl.
Too late for shame at our pubescent jibes?

Rhus that sweats its fronds of scarlet tears reminds
a rainless time there was. For then great sheets of flame

interred paddocks in ashes black of burning grass,
tipped the still burning boughs of trees at night with coals.

Taking a timber mill in its indifferent path
a fire will still triumphant song of spinning saws,
raise to the memory of the forests burning on the pyre
idle chimney tombstones of another sacrifice.

Assembled in the righteous path of peace
the conscripts served the nation's gallant old men,
red glow of cigarette-ends gleaming through the rain.
In the verse-inscribed sentry box I yawned my hour away.
Recalling the propaganda films they showed
to prove how glorious is a world at war.
Although, shots of charred arm-bones really worked—
I went outside trying to retch away those wounds.

Red flame: a hibiscus flower gleams
through its dark leaves and the soft slanting rain.
Insight as suddenly illumines the dusky cave
and shows new shapes on memory's shadowed walls:

rending of dreams where hooded enemy pursue,
as I twist and turn in helpless nightmare flight.
The great and glaring flashes of the guns become
ictic blossoming of nuclear fission clouds.

I walked out in the dusk as a motorcycle passed—
ruby brake-lights clustered in the dark ahead. I
tried to hold him as he twitched and cried
and asked his fruitless ‘whys’ on impassive stones.

Indifference is no easy stance to maintain,
waiting in Casualty for the one you missed,
receiving him with the unfamiliar blood not dried,
taking him out again and homeward into night.

The dark scratching claws of rain
ripping at shaking windows in nights of storms;
always our world is lit again among darker places
into fresh scarlet wounds. Yes, blossoming once more.

Returning like inevitable lines of showers,
insufficient in their first advance to drown,
taking me unawares, proving me weakly human,
are multitudinous memories bleeding in the brain.

NEAR DEATH EXPERIENCE No 3

(240 Great Eastern Highway, October, 1942)

In those days we feared death by war,
for, after all, a world war was raging.
We saw lines and lines of dun green
transports grinding by day and night,
two steps from the brick front fence,
our parapet. And felt brave just to be seen

peering out as twenty-five-pounders
rumbled past with purr of barred tyres.
We counted jeeps and trucks and guns,
our eyes goggling at this armoury of ours.
And thought of the hated enemies with
swastikas and crosses or their rising suns.

The soldier boys seemed to cling to
all parts of their throbbing machines—
beetling bren carriers, mobile canteens,
ack-ack guns and giant low-loaders,
bearing the wicked weight of army tanks.
We waved. In jungle greens they waved back.

Finally a sister tugged our shirt-tails
telling mother was calling us to tea

and talk on the Stromberg Carlson
of another fallen Dunkirk, Dieppe,
Tobruk or Lae. Blackout curtains pulled
tighter, we slept fitfully. Outside, all
night, the searchlights lanced the sky.

CITY TO SURF

(from *Near Death Experience, No, I*)

Since it was so rare to me
in my childhood to traverse
a mysterious dark tunnel,
often in dreams I'd rehearse
long galleries through Alpine stone.

But that first tunnel I saw was
two hundred yards long at most,
a scarpland bolt hole hollowed
near the sandy western coast
of Australia; the one bloody tunnel

in the whole of the railway system
of a state that was a third
of the entire continent!
But it was a wild ride

down to Swanview in a steam train.

On a three-foot-six gauge line
the whole train rocked
like a shaken cocktail as we
left the inland, clocked
a heady thirty-five with whistle's scream.

And when we popped out into sunlight
of a summer afternoon
there was the land's edge spread out
like a signature. We'd soon
be swimming the Swan River's salt mouth.

And so, in a sense, new-born out of
country life we had soared
down steel wheel-squealing grades
while trapped coal smoke poured
from carriage windows as we all leaned out

and entered our first big city.
A bit sooty and begrimed,
where most cooked on wood-fired stoves.
Also from brick kilns, the smoke climbed
to join multitudes from other factory stacks.

On the river's bank, at Goodwood, long
barrows of boiler-clinker glowed

in twilight where rakes of railway wagons
dumped the daily ash. At the river's bridge
we slowed for East Perth Powerhouse.

At last over clutter of criss-crossing points
we slithered into Central Station.
Here it was—slow regional capital Perth,
a smallish town in a nation
newly taken. Pencilled carbon traces on a map.

Sure there were wild times here sometimes:
scandal of divorce once a year,
in Fremantle a drunken sailor running amok,
in squalor a wronged girl, for fear
of birth, dead from a knitting needle.

On limestone hill above bleached port town
there stood the great grave jail
of colonial failure. The cells
like tunnels, where the pale
prisoners swarmed, secret termites of the night.

All memories now, those holiday summers:
hot streets being newly tarred,
daily the cart-horses dropping dung,
while in backyards fallen figs starred
cottage paths and cicadas sang in the trees.

MARGINS

(Acknowledging Arthur Boyd and Sydney Nolan)

Sea girt our homeland
and we would come down
from red gibber plains
and walk in rolled trousers
almost knee deep in its
healing salt waters. Nearby
inevitable jetties
pointed back to civil nations
now far off.

In dusk-pink evenings
with skies dark
and furious
couples would soberly
walk these jetties
or ride solemn
high-wheeled traps
on mudflats with
the dark line of scrub
peering at impertinence.

So we would face inland
with its fossicking
horrors, its jilting promises

its denials.

And merge with that red dust.

AMONG FRIENDS

these other ones

moving mostly in the shadows

among the soft bush shapes

shadowed like the shadows

We who move boldly through their lands
smiling distribute bright cloth and tomahawks,
fat bags of flour and tea in our tempting hands.

but they remain

further off

stricken mortally by our fevered touch

shadowed like the shadows

On the strange rock outcrops we hammer pegs,
the leases and the farmlands measured and shared out;
our flocks trample the billabongs to muddy dregs.

soft bush voices
calling from the red wastelands
speak urgently to our instincts buried in the shades
beyond dynasties of greed

But our cities spear their windowed crystals upwards;
growths of roadway networks multiply
searching in patterned grid for treasure hoards.

the shadows do not
stir our memories of the great forests
cough of sabretooth or pungent taste of woodsmoke
shadowed like the shadows

Compassionate churchmen led our encounter,
our language now includes dingo, boomerang and wombat;
this has been a great endeavour.

in secret places
the shadows are singing
the dust shuffles and ochre and pipeclay stamp
the song is sacred like the shadows

They sit, the tribal elders, heavy with dread perhaps;
we prefer to stand, planes waiting, promising at least.....
we know about Judeans, Sioux, Esquimaux, the Lapps.

but those other ones
moving mostly in the shadows
among soft bush shapes
shadowed always like the shadows

DAY TRIPPER

(for Narelle)

I

The road cast its mind this way and that
between rough shafts of forest eucalypts.
Here a she-oak sifted down its aeolian matrix,
a brown shadow on gravel wheeltracks,
there a grand banksia gestured green frills
in glimpse-sized lengths. Here unexploded
munitions of marri gumnuts, left on the road
by raiding cockatoos, sent shocks under-wheel.
A grave kangaroo paused, then hopped across.

II

Your mind moves continually on
to the turning point in the track ahead,
seeking a way, all the way to the top.
And we climbed to the peak's rocky

crown. To be silenced then by the trees
cowering below. So we sat separately
till spattering rain crouched us down.
Still the forest did not speak to us. And
all the way home we never looked back.

WHO IS TO BLAME?

Cars on the roads.
What was it all about?
I saw smoke and slowed.

A tourist's car, it seemed
had slammed head-on
into a tree. We teamed

together, all those
who stopped at the scene,
intending I suppose

to prove what heroes
we could be to quench
flames before they rose

to consume the slumped

form of the driver
still strangely humped

over the steering wheel.
With doors crushed shut
there seemed no way to steal,
from its fatal queer
contemplation,
this body now so near

to its fiery death.
Then somebody smashed
the capsule's glass. Breath

shuddered through the form
once and it was still.
With fencepost torn

from farm boundary
we levered a jammed
door and finally

a guy could squeeze
into the back seat
and try to seize

the woman's bowed
shoulders and ease

her of that dread load
of the engine's block
and impaling wheel
and column. Shock
of the impact's embrace
(her deathly lover)
gave little grace

to what remained
of a human being.
But still hope detained

the backseat helper there.
He spoke soft words,
urged her to bear

a little longer the wait
until an ambulance
arrived and we could abate

delirium for her
and us. Flames rose
again in red blur

but she died. Too late
to give us chance
of holy estate.

Chance, a hero
discovers, is what he's
been granted to show
to the world's applause.
But just as we
began to pause

in our labours,
think of our own
return to life's favours,

a thin high wail
came from nearby field—
of tin scraped with a nail.

A bundle of rags
dusty and blood-stained
crawls, or rather drags

himself through long grass
wearing it seems
a strange red mask

where face would be.
But through black hole
that could be mouth, he

screams. He's held,

with blanket across
shoulders, until stilled.
The words he has told
confirm he, at least
was asleep when car rolled.

But still he must beat
his breast and curse the
irony of death's deceit:

that he should be thrown
clear, when windscreen burst,
and land in new-turned loam

of a ploughed field
is somehow worse.
No one can shield

him from his road
ahead. We take last
look, as they load
wreck on a tilt-tray
and ambulance
lights up and turns away.

‘What was it all about?’
we wonder. TV news this
night will blab, no doubt.

ANOTHER INVASION DAY

Two pert wagtails watched me,
both bobbing and weaving, as I
with rake and spade did my own
ritual dance across our footpaths
and tossed castaway twig and leaf
into the bag of waiting green trash.

But then I saw that we were all under
attack. Wattlers and honey eaters,
parrots and doves and even crows
were aghast at the bobbing in their
neighbourhood, the weaving in their
precincts, of me and my insurgent pair.
Black and white bandits they seemed
to them, maybe. They screeched and cawed
whistled catcalls (or birdcalls) in their,
cacophony of outrage as if Bird UN
might resolve to send mandated relief.

But ultimately the uproar descended
into real war. The dogfights swerved
up and down fencelines, in and out
of strategic branch and twig. And all

the while the wagtails made light of those
jaded defenders, bobbing and weaving
above disappointed audiences, even
of waiting neighbourhood cats.

Now it is Monday again, the battlefield
has gone quiet, the black and white wagtails
nowhere in sight. Crows lumber out
to gloat over their offspring, tell
each other obscenities, while
busy wattlers patrol with hoarse
outbursts from flowering hakeas,
be-whiskered grevilleas (Robbie
Gordons, no doubt). And the honeyeaters?
They're still busy bustling among orange
blossoms, pattern bombing the bricks beneath.
Of bobbing or weaving there's now nought.

ALIEN ROTTNEST

Within this caul of sand dunes, parched
as a limepit, something menaces me.
Where the ruffian seas assault and slide
up the toothless sands, I am disturbed.

In the drygrass tufts a rustling stirs:
the torpid skink with stumpy claws
and dusky scales traces in dust
its indecipherable scrawled intent.

In the darkliquid shadows of the pines
under a staring moon at the peacock's shriek
the quokkas shuffle, scatter
then gather in watching groups.

I hear the slowsurf on the headland thud.
Drygrass once more is still.
Upwards surges the rosemary scent
as clumsily I tread the blind heath.

Eastward the mainland, where ranks
of lights glimmer like pain through
comatose night; and on an unprinted steep
of sand suddenly the alien castaway...I am quiet.

ADAM AND EVE AND PINCH ME

(at Coalmine Beach)

An Adam in Eden

walks among the heath's

small hard white flowers

on their thin tall stems

dotted among glossy swamp plants.

The radiating crowns of grasstrees

spread their dry skirts below

over dark brine-moist peaty earth.

On the rotting stump of a melaleuca

coiled a small black snake

with all the confident ease

of Eve's serpent.

Shock.

The heart bolts now.

And stops the next breath

about to come.

Wide awake now? So hurry

back along the sandy track.

Back to Eve.

FROST ON THE LANDSCAPE

Frost on fence-railing, capping the tops of posts,
autumn sun over thin salmon-gums by the salt lake,
red in the mist. Steam from post-rail and iron roof:
the frost lifts. Hens shuffle out into streaky sunlight.
The dog heaves on his chain at a cat curled on a post.

In autumn, each autumn, you steel yourself again
for sight and touch of frost. Wakening to frosty
mornings the trembling rabbit leaps at the strike of a trap.
It is hard to forget thin squeals heard across frosted grass,
or the sound of the shaken chain tethering trap to its post.

After the dawn barrage had fractured night,
our section advanced over the shambled earth;
the frosty soil smoked red in the weak sun.
partly interred we found a forward post,
the severed limbs still chained to their icy gun.

Love cannot postpone the time of frosts,
and when in the black ill-starred night
the frost descends to stalk on iron talons,
lovers disturbed by the white scars of the passing
must also wait until unruly sun unchains them.

BLUE/GREEN TRIBUTE

"You cannot step into the same river twice."

Heraclitus

the gulls also come

 swinging in where the curve of sand
embraces blue-green of salt sea

white as the sands

 they settle in the rocking swell
riding as light as love notes crumpled on the waves

and the dark heads of the swimmers

 garbed also in the sea's breaking play
go willingly to be claimed by blue/green depths

Here in the open by the sea

 the knots of reason are unloosed
nets of careful conduct slacken

something in the sea air

 perhaps the old rigour of the blood
unchecked tidal flood and ebb

catching a half-heard phrase

 toss of the head, a faint smile
visible curving line of neck or brow

the free-flying gull,
and darker swimmer draw
unknowingly to this one shore

these same two sharing
a sense of tidal blood
that flows the breadth of skins apart

suddenly then in the blue/green bay
change shakes their heart
with shadows of rain-grey clouds

which sweep in on the wind
and the waves turn white
and the wet salt air brings with them
lesser agony of night

BRIDGETOWN

(from 14 Stations to Southern Cross)

It was bitter cold these winters
when the boy was sent at four a.m.
to rouse the fireman from his iron-roofed home.
The driver had at least a half-hour more
while the fireman set and fired

and built up full pressure of steam.

Later, passengers turned up, still
pre-dawn, to stamp in overcoats
and blow into fists. Bells ringing,
telegraph battering in the station rooms,
as luggage was stacked on trolleys
under weak yellow of lighted lamps.

The fog confirmed its presence
making shafts and cones and halos
of the station's yard lights,
as the locomotive inched out
of its shed with a shuddering thrust
of slipping wheels. And joined up.

Down the carriages the thudding of doors,
now passengers hang out windows in farewell,
the engine driver yanks the cord
and wakes the town with warning whistle blast.
The stationmaster hands over a brass staff,
the guard looks at his fob watch. They depart.
Drawing its brown caterpillar out of dock
the 'E Class' gathers way, whistles again
at the street crossings and passes
between the long apple-drying sheds,
hiving steam pressure for the haul up Hester Bank.
At the start you can never know the way ahead.

MORNINGTON MILLS

(from *14 Stations to Southern Cross*)

When the rats ran through our mill house
which was also the school house, running
and running along joists behind the room's
hessian lining, you could see bulge of bodies
passing. It was a rough town
this mill town. Rougher than we knew.

The big boys broke thorns from bougainvilleas
and pressed them into us to hear our squeals.
Like the rats fighting and mating at night.
While down at the mill-owned tavern
men with only a thumb left on a hand
broke beer bottles over their screaming wives.

When the picture-show man came with his van
and backed up to the recreation hall door,
we could watch the looming black
and white images of Hollywood's zombies
shambling through Limberlost glades,
while comic wide-eyed black men ran
and blubbered more than we did, afterwards,
waking in nightmare rictus in our beds.

In light of day we bravely waved to the driver
tugging a rake of green fresh-cut jarrah,
bleeding in twenty-foot lengths, through
the mill-owned siding which served, by grace,
as mill-town station for the mill-owned populace.

I WOULDN'T HAVE MISSED IT FOR QUIDS

(for Bron)

Looking back on that day,
it all turned out so strangely,
yet vivid still, as a movie scene—
kitchen, wood-fire and cake a-baking,
rain bucketing down on pony
and poddy calves and two stark
muscovies—puddle reflected,
I say thanks for the invite, sister.

Kitchen, car shed, hayshed
but no red wheelbarrow
in the rain. Sorrows the gods
might have signalled they knew
by these downpours. Yet grief
shared, like creatures great

and small and the river running by,
takes many forms. Can have long
strings. Thanks for the invite, sister.

GREENING

Why, in this world of warmed grass
and treeleaves glittering in sunfilled air
do we accept time's ordained spasmodic beat?

Better we envy the stirred air that dallies
over green smooth haunch of land,
dotted with scatter of sun-dulled trees.

Yet I, who envy freedom of air, earth, fire
and welling of water from the spring,
distracted here, measure with words
what is ordained by beat of time.

IN PASSING LANEWAYS

I thought I saw a walking man
down between backyard fences go.
His gait was measured, his hawkish eyes
were fixed ahead as if convinced
by knotting mind he could unwind
the byways maze of backyards blind
that fenced in there those closet lives.

His hat pulled down on beetling brows,
his lips set in repugnant grin,
with resolution on he plunged
from nauseous alleyways
into odorous ashpit lanes.

And so he was lost at last
from view, an unsought spectre
intruding on an idling mind,
omen or ogre or premonition
or all of these.

Yet spare this thought,
my fellow humans—
Whether you wished or no
from this time hence

you share with me
that backyard walker
passing on.

HE CALLED THEM HIS VICTIMS

To be honest I've had victims,
the thickset man said to me
as he swung the heavy Buick
into Park Drive and swiftly
wafted me down that early
morning avenue of plane trees
in full leaf. Thanks for the lift,
I said. I'm a stranger in these
parts. I could have walked miles
finding the right bus. But he kept
on turning left across the park's
thickest belts of virgin bush, swept
along by the smooth power, engine
lifting the peaked bonnet of the car,
thrusting like an arrow down the
narrow bitumen strip, like a scar
parting those dun forest groves.
It's strange, he said with a shove

directed at my braced thigh, I
believed then I acted out of love,
or ignorance. Of course I speak
of them these days as victims. Knew
so little in my youth. I looked
away. The Buick hummed through
ornamental gardens. Where are
we now? I croaked, my throat dry,
sweat running off my forehead. But
we popped out right then (with a cry
I could not quite muffle) onto a high,
wide and handsome boulevard. I
saw the red traffic light ahead
and taking my best chance, fled.

HER GARDEN

Her morning garden presented her a bird
(feet up, beak laid out)
on the wet mortuary slab of the garden path
after a night of rain

Still the gutters dripped
reducing a wheelbarrow to trceries of rust

Amid the ganglions of succulents strung out on spiky stems
she stooped and bent
and stirred the grey sand between geranium cuttings

Here she kept her dying flesh alive
sneezed among the blossoms
chopped the grass verge back

But it outgrew her tiring limbs
the weeds sprang rankly on the paths
leaves fell and rotted where they lay

She nearly found
but no
the barbs of love had passed her by
she made the bird a grave.

COASTWATCHING

(Acknowledging the Original Owners of this Land)

The newer people of this land seem
 when seen from cliff and driven sand
perplexed by memory of a question in their hearts
 lingering like scent of saltbush on the dunes.
Finally far inland they view this shore,
 weighing the images scrupulously as gold dust,
seeking which tilt of fortune brought them here.

When the half-lost sailormen first came,
 this withering blank coast did not
lose patience but lay warming even
 in the winter-brief daylight.
Complaisance is a dangerous state
 and like those sun-warmed shoals
seduces to shipwreck all comers.

KNOW YOUR QUARRY II

'the only fertile research is excavatory'

Samuel Beckett

In quarries opening out to soft blue skies
the granite in great pallid chunks
is levered from its bedrock, flung
rolling and toppling to hollowed floors.

Days are like quarries to be mined
as candle-burning lovers ransack time;
as when a child pursues a tumbling pup,
or old men, sunning in winter, over papers frown.

In quarries hammered in the ancient hills
the granite, grey as polar seas, gritted with quartz,
cracks from exploding cliffs. Down powdery
talus slope tumbles in ponderous tors.

Yes, days are like quarries to be left behind:
the ravages we make in spending lives
we did not ask for, but have found out how to use.
Leaving the years as hollows where the days

came tumbling down. So, art is the hunting out
of stony days, learning the trick of what to take

and leave, prising from the scarps of virgin time
such quarried stone as holds strange shape of truth.



This book is dedicated to my parents, Elliott and Alberta Phillips
Who introduced me to the Southwest of Western Australia.